

Shirtless protest, lawsuit mark power feud among Michigan Libertarians



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Lansing — The Libertarian National Committee has sued some of Michigan's most active Libertarian politicians in federal court, alleging they had "illegitimately claimed" leadership positions within the state party and unlawfully used party trademarks.

The suit filed Friday in Michigan's Eastern District pointed to philosophical divisions within the Libertarian Party, which champions the idea of limited government and whose candidates often win the third most votes in key races behind Democrats and Republicans.

Two party factions with competing visions and websites — one is michiganlp.org and one is michiganlp.net — are contending they control the Libertarian Party of Michigan.

The Libertarian National Committee's filing said a group of Michigan Libertarians, led by Mike Saliba of Clinton Township, had improperly used the trademark "Libertarian Party." The national committee also alleged that Saliba, who some view as the state party's current chairman, joked about burning cease and desist letters, and Brian Ellison, a former Libertarian U.S. Senate candidate, disrupted a recent party meeting by "stripping off" clothing.

EXHIBIT 37

"Defendants and their associates have made it clear that their intent is to disrupt, dilute and defame the trademark and good will of the plaintiff and ignore any demands for cessation," the lawsuit by the Libertarian National Committee said.



Brian Ellison, former candidate for lieutenant governor, took his shirt off in protest of a Libertarian Party of Michigan board meeting in January. The incident was mentioned in a new lawsuit filed by the national Libertarian Party. *Court Records*

The national committee said Andrew Chadderdon of Westland is the current chairman of the Libertarian Party of Michigan. But other Libertarians in the state argue that Chadderdon was removed from the position in 2022 and Saliba is the current chairman.

The national committee has named Saliba, 2022 Libertarian gubernatorial candidate Mary Buzuma and 2022 Libertarian secretary of state candidate Gregory Stempfle as defendants in the new lawsuit.

Ellison of Monroe, who was not named as a defendant but was mentioned in the suit, was the Libertarian Party's nominee for lieutenant governor last year. He and Buzuma got 0.9% of the total statewide vote, about 39,000 votes.

The national committee is using the lawsuit to go after people who helped build the Libertarian Party in Michigan, Ellison said in a Monday interview.

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"The whole thing is a big mess," Ellison said of the conflict.

Ellison confirmed that he removed his shirt during a Libertarian Party board meeting over Zoom in January in protest because he wasn't being allowed to speak during the session. Others on the call were also shirtless, he said.

"I feel like I probably should have worked out a little bit more before I did it," Ellison said with a laugh.

The Libertarian National Committee included a photo of Ellison without his shirt on and his face redacted as an exhibit in its lawsuit.

'Keeping warm'

In a February letter that was filed in court on Friday, Angela McArdle, chairwoman of the Libertarian National Committee, wrote that the Libertarian Party of Michigan's Judicial Committee had overruled a decision to remove Chadderdon as the state party's chairman.

"Absent a decision from the LNC or the national Judicial Committee to the contrary, national Platform Committee appointments and national delegate entitlements, along with ballot access, remain with the party presently chaired by Mr. Chadderdon, and his legitimately elected successors," McArdle's letter said.

On behalf of Chadderdon, lawyer Eric Doster, former counsel for the Michigan Republican Party, sent a message to the other faction of Michigan Libertarians on Feb. 15 demanding that they "cease to engage in any fundraising on behalf" of the Libertarian Party of Michigan, according to court records.

Thirteen days after the Doster letter, Saliba posted a meme on social media of a raging fire with the words "me keeping warm with all these cease and desist letters." The Libertarian National Committee included a photo of the social media post in its court filing.

Asked about the post, Saliba laughed in a Monday phone interview.

He hoped to goad the national committee into filing the first lawsuit, he said.

"I forgot I did that," Saliba added.



Mike Saliba



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Mike Saliba, viewed by some as the chairman of the Libertarian Party of Michigan, makes a social media post joking about burning cease and desist letters. *Court Records*

In a statement, Chadderdon said a "rogue group" is "falsely claiming to be the party's leadership in violation of our organization's bylaws."

"As chair of the Libertarian Party of Michigan, I will say that these matters have been an unfortunate distraction from the goals of the party," Chadderdon said. "We are working to promote legislation such as Defend the Guard, working to recruit and train candidates to run for local office and building partnerships with other groups that promote liberty in Michigan so that we can amplify the impact of our individual actions."

Marketplace or court decides?

Multiple Michigan Libertarians described the rift as involving some longtime party advocates versus backers of the Libertarian Party Mises Caucus, named after economist Ludwig Heinrich Edler von Mises.

The Mises Caucus has taken over the national party and has been pushing social conservatism to the forefront of the discussion, said Rafael Wolf of Kalamazoo, one of the eight Libertarians named as defendants in the new lawsuit. The nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center described the Mises Caucus as a "hard-right movement" last year.

The national party should let the "marketplace decide" who controls the state party and its intervention through the federal court system was "anti-Libertarian," Wolf said.

The Mises Caucus has been backing Chadderdon's bid to run the state party, Saliba said. But he said the new lawsuit was "frivolous."

"The national party has no business suing us," Saliba said. "Because we're not pretending to be the national party. We're the Libertarian Party of Michigan."

In Michigan campaign finance records, Chadderdon is listed as the treasurer of the Michigan Mises political action committee, which was formed in August.

Saliba said he was hopeful the litigation and divide within the state party wouldn't hinder the Libertarian Party's campaigns in Michigan in 2024.

The Libertarian National Committee has asked a federal judge to issue an injunction barring the defendants from using, advertising or publicizing any information featuring the party's trademarks and to require them to pay monetary damages. The trademarks include "Libertarian Party" and the Libertarian Party logo, according to the lawsuit.

The national committee's lawyer is Joseph Zito of Washington, D.C.

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